

## The Effectiveness of the Sex Education Package on the Body-esteem in Elementary School Children

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### ABSTRACT

**Objective :** The primary objective of this research endeavor was to examine the efficacy of a sex education program in enhancing the body-esteem of young students in elementary school.

**Methods:** This study adopted an experimental approach, employing a pre-test-post-test design with a control group. The statistical population encompassed all girls attending primary schools in Shiraz during the academic year of 2021. Through random sampling, a total of 30 female students were selected, divided equally into an experimental group and a control group, comprising 15 students each. To assess body-esteem, the Body-Esteem Scale (Franzoi & Shields, 1984) was utilized.

**Results:** The results of the covariance analysis revealed that the F statistic for the body-esteem variable attained a significant level of 0.001. This finding indicates that the implementation of the sex education package for elementary school children has exerted a positive and significant impact on their body-esteem.

**Conclusions:** In summary, the outcomes of this study underscore the efficacy of sex education in terms of its influence on the emotional and affective outputs in primary school students.

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## Introduction

The term body esteem refers to the influential component of body image or feelings that a person has about his body (Franzoi and Shields, 1984). Body esteem is a culturally sensitive construct, meaning that the body parts and body functions that men and women consider important when evaluating themselves vary based on cultural changes in the standards that define attractive and healthy bodies according to gender (Pope et al., 2001). In addition to values and feelings, people's view of their body and the respect they have for it, that is, respect for the body, is also very important. Body esteem, which is the physical equivalent of self-esteem, is defined as a person's attitudes, evaluations, and feelings about the body (Mendelsohn & White, 1985). Because people's perceptions of their physical appearance are incorporated into their self-concept, their attitudes toward their bodies, for example, size and shape and attractiveness, are expected to be related to their self-esteem. These attitudes or evaluations are referred to as body satisfaction or body respect (Silberstein et al., 1988).

Because Iran is a young country and 20% of its population is made up of young people, and 27.7% of young Iranians start their first sexual experience at the age of 15, and 68.2% of young people are involved in at least one risky sexual activity (Rahmani, 2018) as well as high-risk sexual behaviors, such as unprotected sexual intercourse and multiple sexual participation, is the second main way of HIV transmission in Iran, and since the development and progress and continuation of risk-reducing behaviors is one of the goals of sex education (guideline between International Society of Sexual Education, 2009) and according to the statistics presented by domestic researchers in various sexual and family health seminars, between 50 and 70% of divorces have been declared directly and indirectly due to sexual problems between couples. Aminzadeh (2009) and Sabet (2007) states that one of the most important reasons for divorce in Iran is the lack of knowledge and familiarity of couples regarding sexual issues, and it can be said that 75% of marriages lead to divorce for this reason; Also, researchers such as Nematzadeh Khamsi (2009) concluded in their research that teaching sexual skills and issues of married life has prevented many sexual and marital problems, disputes and family conflicts and improved the quality of life of couples.

Sexual education is the process of giving information and forming attitudes and beliefs about puberty and sexual issues, sexual identity, sexual health (Mandigo, 2020) and familiarity with one's gender and sexual roles and a sense of self-worth (Faqihi, 2017), which should be done before puberty (Chaywong-Rouge and Boarfan, 2020) to be provided to the individual; Psychologists believe that providing sexual information to teenagers should start a little earlier before they become heavily involved in sexual issues (Kirimi, 2017). According to the United Nations Population Fund (2020), comprehensive sexuality education is a curriculum-based process for teaching and learning about the cognitive, emotional, physical and social aspects of sexuality. It aims to equip children and adolescents with the knowledge, skills, attitudes and values that enable them to understand their own health, well-being and dignity, develop respectful social and sexual relationships, and consider how their choices affect their well-being and influence others and understand their rights throughout life.

Chaiwong Rouge and Boarfan (2020) in a study conducted in Thailand to investigate the effectiveness of sex education courses for students in three schools, concluded that all participants learned from very sexual and unrealistic examples shown in movies, websites and social media. They are given, they learn, so sex education programs were very effective in helping them understand, attitude and sexual awareness both quantitatively and qualitatively, and their knowledge and attitude improved significantly after the trainings. Since the research shows that in Thailand sexual relations start at the age of 13, the participants stated that they felt the need for sex education as an important topic for their daily life and stated that these educations are very useful in life. Also, after the end of the research, the researchers state that the beginning of the sex education program should be done from the elementary level, especially in high-risk areas and appropriate to the context of the school, using a constructivist approach, and these programs can include information about AIDS, high-risk sexual behavior. and the pregnancy is unexpected.

Fidah et al. (2020) in research conducted in Indonesia on the importance of sexual education in schools, while emphasizing the importance of sexual education of students in schools, announced that behavioral problems of adolescents such as sexual issues, abortion, pornography, substance abuse is increasing in developing countries. The researchers state that sexual education should take place in moral and religious frameworks and it is expected to provide a correct understanding of

sex, the formation of responsible attitudes towards oneself, society and religion in overcoming sexual disturbances and as skills to prevent.

Osman and Nicholson (2022), examining body esteem by type of sexual victimization experience among 750 undergraduate women at university, stated that women without sexual victimization experience did not differ from women with sexual contact experience, but both groups had body esteem higher than women with coercion, forced effort and rape experience. Qadirianpour et al. (2021) in a research titled "Examination of the position and role of sex education in the primary school and presentation of the educational framework" showed that the primary school textbooks are not in a good condition in terms of paying attention to the components of sex education and only focus on some skill components in the sixth grade of elementary school has been given attention and other knowledge, attitude and skill components of sex education in different grades have been neglected. Specialists have considered it necessary to pay attention to sexual education in this course, due to its all-round educational and educational role in order to improve and stabilize the status of the school, the purpose of which is body awareness, identification, maintaining health and safety.

Sex education can be included in the curriculum in the framework of formal education in the three stages of empowering the family, teachers and students, and in informal education using educational media and the school landscape plan. Based on the findings, educational leaders are advised to pay due attention to the field of sex education in the primary school curricula. Mortezaeifar et al. (2022) in a research titled "Compilation of an educational package of sexual education for children from birth to 5 years old for parents and determining its effectiveness on the knowledge and attitude and performance of parents regarding the prevention of sexual abuse and their sense of parenting adequacy in two groups "Normal and single mothers (parent-mother)" showed that for the purpose of implementing the package designed, first, mothers with children under 5 years of age are selected from among normal and control kindergartens in Tehran using available sampling method, the number of samples, for each the group of mothers of normal and single-parent children was 60 people who were randomly selected (120 people in total) and were placed in two control and experimental groups (30 people in each group). The results showed that compared to the post-test changes in the normal and single-parent groups, the findings show that

the intervention program had a greater effect in the single-parent group than the normal group in all variables.

Considering the importance of the psychological issue of body esteem, the present study seeks to evaluate the effectiveness of the sex education package on the body esteem in elementary school children.

### **Materials and Methods**

The current study was an experimental type with a pre-test-post-test design with a control group. The statistical population of this research included all primary school girls in Shiraz in 2022. The sampling method in this research was random among girls' primary schools in Shiraz. The sample size was 30 female students who were studying in elementary school in 2022, 15 in the experimental group and 15 in the control group were randomly assigned.

At first, a letter was given by the office of the Islamic Azad University, Marvdasht Branch, to introduce the researcher to the Education Research Institute. After going through the administrative procedures in the General Directorate of Education of Fars, the researcher managed to get permission to conduct research in primary schools. Then 30 primary school girls were randomly selected. It should be noted that the placement of students in each group was done randomly, and the pre-test, which included the body esteem questionnaire, was conducted on the sample group under the same conditions in the school. Considering the young age of the children and their lack of understanding about some questions, each question was read separately and then they were asked to mark the relevant answer after giving the necessary explanations. After conducting the pre-test on all the samples, sex education training was conducted on the experimental group during 10 sessions and for 45 minutes in each session, taking into account moral principles and Iranian culture, as well as the age level and level of curiosity of the children. After the completion of the training sessions, both experimental and control groups were evaluated again in the same conditions and using the mentioned scale, and the results were analyzed with the help of SPSS-17 software. The compilation package of the researcher in the field of sex education includes the following sessions:

**Table 1.** Sex education package summary

Session	Content
<b>1</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Getting to know the students and talking with them</li> <li>-Creating a friendly and trusting environment</li> <li>-Conducting the pre-test</li> <li>-Familiarity with body parts in general and their hygiene and naming</li> </ul>
<b>2</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Getting to know the genitals in general and their hygiene and naming</li> <li>-Getting to know the concept of public and private body in general</li> <li>-Complete a number of worksheets with children</li> <li>-Reviewing the contents of the previous sessions and answering the children's possible questions</li> <li>-Getting to know the differences between humans in general and the differences between girls and boys</li> </ul>
<b>3</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Encouragement to love yourself as a girl</li> <li>-Talking and telling stories about some heroic women and girls, athletes and elites, using photos, pictures and videos, and reading their life stories.</li> <li>-Reviewing the contents of the previous sessions and answering the children's possible questions</li> </ul>
<b>4</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Continuity of touches</li> <li>-Inevitable touches</li> <li>-Red flag, green flag game</li> <li>-We all need nice touches</li> </ul>
<b>5</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Secret law</li> <li>-Reading the book Touch Good Touch Bad</li> <li>-Reviewing the contents of the previous sessions and answering the children's possible questions</li> <li>-Teaching the skill of saying no/the skill of assertiveness/along with the performance of the game with Poppy doll</li> <li>-Leaving the place/best reaction</li> <li>-Report to an elder/ask for help</li> <li>-Reading the book I can say out loud no!</li> <li>-Reviewing the contents of the previous sessions and answering the children's possible questions</li> </ul>
<b>6</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Self-esteem skills</li> <li>-Positive mental image of the body</li> <li>-Value and respect for the privacy of oneself and others and increase physical self-esteem</li> <li>-Find your abilities game and worksheet and I can, they can</li> <li>-Reading the book you are unique.</li> <li>-You are responsible for your own body</li> <li>-Reviewing the contents of the previous sessions and answering the children's possible questions</li> </ul>
<b>7</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Recognizing one's own and others' feelings</li> <li>-Trust your feelings</li> <li>-Playing and telling stories with the help of emotions</li> <li>-Reviewing the contents of the previous sessions and answering the children's possible questions</li> </ul>
<b>8</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Reviewing the contents of the previous sessions and answering the children's possible questions</li> <li>-The ways in which children are threatened or seduced</li> <li>-Reading Topoli book: Don't touch my body!</li> </ul>
<b>9</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Post-test implementation</li> </ul>

French and Shields (1984) questionnaire was used to evaluate the body esteem variable. This questionnaire consists of 35 items. The participants are asked to rate their level of satisfaction or dissatisfaction with different organs and functions of the body on a 5-point Likert scale. The dimensions defining body dignity are unique for men and women. The three dimensions for men are: physical attractiveness, upper body strength, and physical condition. The three dimensions for women are: sexual attractiveness, weight concern, and physical condition (Frost et al., 2018).

The internal validity of the body esteem scale was 0.81-0.87 for male subscales and 0.87-0.87 for female subscales. In the present study, Cronbach's alpha coefficient of this scale was 0.94.

The inclusion criteria include; Studying in one of the primary girls' schools in Shiraz city, no history of physical illness, desire and consent to participate in the study, no use of psychiatric drugs, no other psychological treatment methods during the implementation of the research, and no occurrence of tension incidents like a divorce or the death of a loved one in the last six months. Exclusion criteria include: non-participation in the schedule of training sessions, absence of more than two sessions in the schedule of sessions, failure to complete and correct questionnaires at each stage of the research, occurrence of an incident affecting the subject's personal life so that he was unable to continue participating in the sessions, and taking drugs had an effect on the research results. Also, the ethical issues observed in the research include; obtaining voluntary consent from the subjects, the subjects were allowed to refuse to continue participating in the program whenever they were not able to continue in the intervention program, and the information about the subjects was kept completely confidential.

After completing the educational interventions and collecting statistical information, the data was analyzed at two descriptive and inferential levels using SPSS-17 software. Descriptive statistics such as frequency, mean, standard deviation, etc. were used to describe the data, and covariance analysis was used to examine the research hypothesis.

## Results

Table 2 shows the mean and standard deviation of the tone variable and its components in the experimental and control groups.

**Table 2.** Mean and standard deviation of the body esteem in the experimental and control groups

Group	Variable	Pretest		Post-test	
		Mean	SD	Mean	SD
Control	Body esteem	57.66	11.01	56.20	10.94
	Sexual attractiveness	24.26	4.74	23.23	4.20
	Weight concern	18	5.63	17.73	5.68
	Physical condition	15.40	3.08	14.93	3.32
Experimental	Body esteem	58.33	10.90	98.60	6.81
	Sexual attractiveness	24.53	4.74	43.13	4.51
	Weight concern	18.33	5.36	30.06	3.32
	Physical condition	15.46	3.13	25.40	4.32

The Kolmogorov-Smirnov test was used to check the normality of the data. Since the values of the Kolmogorov-Smirnov test were not significant in any of the stages ( $p < 0.05$ ), it can be concluded that the distribution of scores is normal. Levene's test was also used to check the homogeneity of variances. According to the results, Levene's test statistic was not statistically significant ( $p < 0.05$ ) and thus the assumption of equality of variances was confirmed. The research data did not question the assumption of homogeneity of variance-covariance matrices (M-Box); Therefore, this assumption has also been met ( $p > 0.05$ ). The significance level of the interaction between the group and the pre-test was greater than 0.05, and this indicated the homogeneity of the slope of the regression line. Considering that the assumptions of using multivariate analysis of variance have been met, this statistical test can be used. Table 3 shows the results of multivariate analysis of variance.

**Table 3.** The results of multivariate tests

Test	Value	F	Hypothesis DF	Error DF	p
Pillai's Trace	0.0906	73.97	4	23	0.001
Wilks' lambda	0.094	73.97	4	23	0.001
Hotelling's trace	9.64	73.97	4	23	0.001
Roy's largest root	9.64	73.97	4	23	0.001

According to the results of Table 2, it can be seen that the value of F is significant at the level of 0.001 in the four tests of Pillai's Trace, Wilks' lambda, Hotelling's trace and Roy's largest root. The recent result shows that the educational method of this research has made a significant difference in at least one of the dimensions of body esteem. To show the exact difference, the results of univariate analysis of covariance were displayed in Table 4.

**Table 4.** Results of univariate analysis of covariance

Effect	Variable	SS	DF	MS	F	p
Group	Sexual attractiveness	2849.14	1	2849.14	166.33	0.001
	Weight concern	1119.22	1	1119.22	61.79	0.001
	Physical condition	804.81	1	804.81	59.10	0.001

According to the results of the analysis of covariance and the level of significance in Table 3, it can be seen that the F index is significant for the dimensions of sexual attractiveness, concern about weight and physical condition. According to the average values in Table 1, it can be seen that the average values of the dimensions mentioned in the post-test have increased compared to



the pre-test, so this significance is in favor of the experimental group. Also, according to the significance of the indicators in covariance analysis, it can be said that sex education has had a positive and significant effect on improving body esteem.

## Discussion

Although no research has been conducted directly on this issue, many studies have been conducted whose results can be considered to be in line with the results of this research; For example, many researches have talked about the effect of body image and emphasized the effect of negative body image on inappropriate sexual behaviors. In their research, Winter et al. (2019) stated that body image can affect girls' sexual behavior and sexual health, and Schooler (2013) stated that body satisfaction may play an important role in adolescent sexual health; Other studies such as Gilen et al. (2006), Satinsky et al. (2013), Merianos et al. (2013), also found that negative body image is related to the increase of risky sexual behaviors among girls and women; Yusef Lu et al. (2019), state that women who had higher body image satisfaction had better sexual performance.

Based on the research findings and literature review, it can be concluded that there is a relationship between body image, sexual behavior and sexual health. A negative body image is associated with increased risky sexual behaviors among girls and women, while a positive body image is associated with better sexual performance and satisfaction. Sex education programs emphasizing the importance of body respect and self-care can play an important role in promoting a positive body image and reducing risky sexual behaviors. By teaching children the correct names of body parts, how to care for them, and the responsibility of taking care of them, they learn to respect their bodies and others, which leads to mental health, marital satisfaction, and overall sexual health. These findings highlight the importance of implementing comprehensive sex education programs that promote healthy body image and prevent negative body attitudes.

Through the definitions provided for sexual education, it can be concluded that reducing high-risk sexual behaviors and increasing satisfaction with sexual performance and promoting sexual health in adults are among the goals and necessities of sexual education programs in different countries and cultures. According to what has been said, it can be said that one of the most important roles that sex education educators should emphasize is strengthening the liking of the appearance and different parts of the body in children. When children are taught sex education packages, they first

learn the correct names of their organs and then how to care for them and love their organs, and with these trainings, they realize that their bodies belong to them and it is their duty and responsibility to take care of them. It is the person's responsibility, so they will not easily allow their body to be assaulted, just as they will not give the same right to others; Therefore, they learn to respect their body and others as a duty, and due to the respect, they have for their body, they will have the right to enjoy married life within the cultural and accepted frameworks of the society, and in this way, their mental health and that of their family and they will guarantee the society. For example, Price et al. (2023), concluded in their research that there is a relationship between respect for the body and satisfaction with personal sexual relations.

There are other researches that have indirectly dealt with the issue of the effect of sexual education on the sanctity of the body. In these studies, the relationship between body respect and self-esteem has been studied. One of the main components in the sexual education program is to address self-esteem and increase self-respect in children; Because, according to researchers, self-esteem and body respect are closely related to each other; For example, Mendelson and White (1982), consider body esteem as the physical equivalent of self-esteem and define it as a person's attitudes, evaluations, and feelings about the body. According to this definition, they can be examined together. The researches of Connors and Casey (2006), Henry Kuis and Galhen (1999) and Nelson et al. (2018) are among the researches that have expressed the relationship between self-esteem and body respect. Olchuska et al. (2018) also state Improving one's physical condition is a simple way to increase self-esteem. Therefore, it can be concluded that people's self-esteem is strongly influenced by their perceptions of their body parts. The more positive a person has about himself, the more valuable he feels. Fonseca et al. (2023), state that body image dissatisfaction affects low self-esteem in both sexes. Therefore, in order to improve self-esteem, we should include options for teaching respect for the body or respect for the body in sexual education packages so that the person does not easily engage in risky sexual behaviors that threaten his mental health and the society.

On the other hand, research has shown that one of the goals of the sexual education program is to reduce the amount of sexual abuse. Zanella (2021), states that there is a need to implement mandatory comprehensive sexual education programs to prevent sexual abuse of children. Lehrabi

and Morechgani (2019) also emphasize the effect of education in preventing sexual abuse. A person who participates in these programs learns the principles of self-care and does not easily allow abuse by others, and as a result, the respect and honor of the body is less threatened. Osman and Mervin (2020), state that women who were raped in the past year (recently) have a lower level of body respect and self-esteem than women who were raped more than a year ago (previously). Their findings show that lower body esteem, in addition to lower self-esteem, is correlated with recent aggression. Firoozi et al. (2015) also came to the conclusion in their research that they addressed the destructive effect of childhood abuse and stated that the experience of childhood abuse in married women is associated with sexual dysfunction and leads to a negative mental image of self and decreased sexual performance.

Therefore, it can be concluded from the above researches that people who have been raped suffer a lot of injuries, including the loss of dignity and respect for the body, and also various researches state that body image can affect the sexual behavior and sexual health of girls.

Therefore, in order to increase the sexual health of today's girls and tomorrow's mothers, it is necessary to minimize the harm caused to them in order to achieve a healthier society. To achieve this goal, the implementation of the sex education program, one of the main components of which is to increase body respect and interest in body parts, should be placed at the top of special education for children and teenagers.

The researcher has faced the following limitations while conducting the research:

- Non-cooperation of education and relevant organizations for the full and principled implementation of the sex education program in schools and high sensitivity on the word "sex"
- Misunderstanding of some officials and parents about sex education program and equating it with sex education
- Unavailability of similar researches for the background

Also, in order to be more targeted and effective in the future research, the following suggestions are made:

- Sexual education programs should be available to children in the pre-primary and above periods, apart from cultural and political biases, according to the children's age and gradually.
- Institutions responsible for the education of children and adolescents must make detailed plans in this field.

- Radio and television should use experts and filmmakers who are familiar with the developmental stages and needs of children and teenagers to make animations and related programs and provide the necessary awareness.

#### **Data availability statement**

The original contributions presented in the study are included in the article/supplementary material, further inquiries can be directed to the corresponding author.

#### **Ethics statement**

The studies involving human participants were reviewed and approved by ethics committee of Islamic Azad University.

#### **Author contributions**

All authors contributed to the study conception and design, material preparation, data collection and analysis. The author contributed to the article and approved the submitted version.

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#### **Conflict of interest**

The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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